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EZRA GREENSPAN

Introduction

“Let America therefore celebrate its poets” was Herman Melville’s way in 1850 of articulating the problematic situation of the poet and poetry in America just a few years before the appearance of Walt Whitman as a self-proclaimed national poet. Melville’s words probably sounded shrill even then, and today, given the general reception by the country of its poets ever since it has become possible to talk of American poets, they barely manage to resonate. Both Melville and Whitman knew well that the situation of the poet and of letters in American society *was* an issue – and a complicated one, at that – in their time. For Whitman, in fact, it was a crucial issue, one to which he devoted his fullest energies from his days as a young journalist in the 1840s and as a brash young poet in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) until the end of his life in 1892.

In this context, the widespread commemoration and celebration of Whitman, both in the United States and abroad in the centennial year of 1992, were themselves a phenomenon invested with intriguing cultural significance. One of the most interesting aspects of the centennial was the degree to which it passed from an act of commemoration to one of genuine celebration. It is one thing that academic conferences honoring Whitman were held from coast to coast; it is quite another – and one befitting Whitman himself, lover of the spoken word – that they were all surpassed by the marathon public readings of Whitman, and of poems inspired by or written in imitation of him, that went on for days in New York.

Personally speaking, I cannot help but believe that there was something appropriate about the public readings of Whitman in New York City. For one thing, Whitman was the ultimate New York poet – singer of movement and mobility, poet of ferries and bridges, coquette-lover of crowds, celebrator of diversity, master of self-advertising, and manipulator of images. For another, Whitman was uncannily a poet of the spoken word – a remark, I hope, that will not sound tautological. What I mean by this is that Whitman not only absorbed much of the flavor of the spoken arts – oratory, theater,

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opera, bardic poetry – into his own poetry but that he also had a deep sense – no matter if it was more fantasy than actuality – of addressing standing audiences that included “poets to come,” who would, in turn, speak his thoughts or thoughts akin to his to future generations of listeners. A self-educated man and a self-created poet, Whitman was never one to fit the established cultural models and modes of artistic creation, publication, reception, and delivery. What could be more fitting, then, than all-night readings on the grass or out in the open or attended by mixed groups of fellow poets, critics, and simple lovers of the Whitmanesque word. In this context, 1992 brought Whitman’s “followers” their ultimate poetic “present”: his own voice, captured on a flawed but still audible recording, reading his obscure little poem “America.” That we cannot know for sure that the old man’s voice we hear passing over the words slowly and cherishingly is actually Whitman’s would no doubt have given him reason to laugh; he had played the game of imposing false and multiple identities of himself on his listeners all his mature life. Why stop after life?

No less curious than the spectacle of Whitman celebrations around the country is the term itself. “Celebrate” was, after all, the first verb used in the opening poem of Whitman’s first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It was also one of the most fundamental concept terms in Whitman’s poetry generally: His poetry articulated and performed a celebration of life. But Whitman was too shrewd an observer of his society not to be aware that celebration, as a rite of public affirmation, had become by the time of his generation a problematic matter. Holidays were no longer necessarily holy days; what was a secularized person to make of Christmas or Easter? For Whitman himself, more significant than either of those days was the Fourth of July, whose pageantry and histrionics alternately attracted and repelled him. At times, for lack of acceptable forums for public celebration, his own tendency was to revert to privatized substitutions, such as his nostalgic sentimentalization of Washington’s separation from his troops or of Lafayette’s heroic passage through Brooklyn during his return visit to America in 1824 (and to the special kiss he planted on the boy Whitman’s forehead). At other times, his tendency was to seek out the crowds of people – on Broadway, on ferry crossings, in theaters, in army hospitals – and to observe with fascination the places of public architecture – the Crystal Palace, the Capitol, the White House – as grounds of potential celebration. The real celebration, though, Whitman was to find only in the complex and conflicted one he created in the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, whose strangely divided and uneven reception by the American reading public raised from a different perspective the problem of celebration in his society.

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Seen in a larger context, the Whitman Centennial was but a part of the reevaluation of American culture currently going on everywhere from the academy to the Capitol. Clearly, we are today living through one of the cultural revisions that have periodically marked the political and cultural history of the United States during this century as new groups of people have entered our institutions and projected their voices and views into the language of societal debates. The current one, however, seems particularly far-reaching and unsettling in its criticism, challenging all groups to go back to first terms and, with the prefix “re” in the air, pressing them to reconsider and revise their basic premises. It is no coincidence that precisely at this time Walt Whitman, who relished a good fight with establishments, has again become one of the most current figures in American literary criticism. Even in the absence of major new biographical information, he is the subject of various new biographical studies, as well as more generally of the largest and most broadly conceived variety of critical studies he has ever received. Their meeting point, to the extent that one can see unity behind diversity, lies in the shared perception of the necessity to reformulate the terms in which we “see” Whitman.

Although Whitman is a typical instance of the way writers today generally have been coming in for their share of new scrutiny, the extraordinary amount of attention he has been receiving is particularly appropriate. Whitman liked to identify himself and his poetry with the country on the grand scale but, regardless of whether one today accepts him in his claim to representative stature, studies of him have typically gone beyond or through him to become analyses of American culture and society. His centrality to American culture readily raises discussions of him, as Emerson’s raises his, to a higher, more inclusive level than is the case with their contemporaries. In fact, discussions of Whitman have often gone beyond even those of Emerson in tracing his influence across formal lines into the arts and music, fields in which Whitman has had a profound impact on the way creative people have expressed their sense of life. Whitman had a sharp eye and ear for the arts – photography, opera, drama, painting – as well as an uncanny appreciation for the creative process, a matter that he enjoyed foregrounding in his own creative work. But there is also a further reason for Whitman’s centrality to studies of American culture. In his pursuit of an ideological commitment to reshaping the idea of culture along more open terms and, in doing so, to including peoples and subjects in his poetry previously kept out of or thought alien to culture, Whitman has become a natural subject for the citizens of our own more open, inclusive culture. The poet who self-consciously brought blacks, Native Americans, mothers, prostitutes, lovers,

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workers, American slang, and the latest technological gadgets into his poetry has today become a natural subject for an array of students and scholars working in such diverse fields as African-American, feminist, Native American, gay, semiotic, popular culture, and print culture studies, all of whom can readily align their subjects (and often their personal points of view) with Whitman's imposing target. Although they may differ over whether they like or approve of Whitman, they have all found that they cannot easily disregard him.

In assembling the following group of new critical essays on Whitman, I have attempted to elicit a broad variety of scholarly responses and kinds of responses to Whitman, one that will reflect the wide-open, decentralized situation of current thinking. Recognizing that a genuine attempt to cover all bases would require a multivolume format, I have made a virtue of necessity by compiling what Whitman himself might have called a "suggestive" volume, one designed to expose readers to a variety of critical perspectives on and approaches to the phenomenon of Whitman, and to do so via a medley of voices, accents, and critical discourses.

A few words about individual essays may be in order. Three of the essays offer strong new interpretations of different parts of Whitman's long career. Stephen Railton addresses the *I – you* relationship in Whitman's early poetry, a central topic in recent criticism, but figures it in novel terms as an act of poetic performance and traces its origins back to Whitman's uneasy homosexuality. M. Wynn Thomas offers an equally bold reevaluation in discussing Whitman's Civil War career. His far-ranging interpretation of the period that Whitman came to think of as the emotional and creative touchstone of his life understands Whitman as engaged in an ongoing act of "interconnection" – between soldiers and civilians, wounded men and their families, and himself and the reading public. Right at the center of these acts of connection he locates Whitman's soldier-brother George, whom most critics generally dismiss as Whitman's temperamental opposite but whom Thomas sees as Whitman's fraternal objective correlative to the events of the Civil War. Similarly, James Perrin Warren challenges the near consensus that has developed among post-Vietnam-age critics regarding the character and quality of Whitman's late poetry, whether defined as post-1860 or post-Civil War. He contests the view that Whitman entered a period of decline by proposing a countermodel of Whitman as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary poet and by explicating "Passage to India," a poem now for several decades out of critical favor, along the lines of his model.

As I have mentioned, Whitman has long been a touchstone for critics

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trying to understand the culture of nineteenth-century America. Three of the essays track approaches to Whitman broadly different in their orientation but allied in their identification of Whitman with his period. Sherry Ceniza takes up the long-standing issue of Whitman's poetic treatment of women and gives it an intriguingly nonconformist feminist reading by analyzing the enthusiastic response of three independent-minded contemporary women reading the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. Ironically, she finds, they found him more liberating than do most of their descendants today. David Reynolds takes a different tack in attempting to fix Whitman on the map of his society by juxtaposing him closely to leading midcentury social and political movements in which he moved or had an interest. More indirectly concerned with politics and ideology, I present in my essay a discursive analysis of a central device of his poetry: the present participles he used either in measured sequences or in patterned formations. First mastered in 1855 and never abandoned thereafter as a building block of his poetry, they served him well as a verbal construction through which he could express his sense of the conditions of American life.

The essays by Ed Folsom, Ruth Bohan, and Alan Trachtenberg all trace outlines of thinking regarding Whitman and nonprint media. Folsom analyzes Whitman's lifelong fascination with the new art of photography, whose developments were contemporaneous with Whitman's own life and, as Folsom shows, whose applications were one of the most resourceful experiments Whitman made in his self-presentational mode of book making. Projecting Whitman into the twentieth century, Trachtenberg presents a general overview of Whitman's influence on the moderns. As he persuasively demonstrates, it was so pervasive that its purview reads like an unending Whitmanian catalog. One of the early-twentieth-century creative spirits most profoundly influenced by Whitman, as Bohan shows, was Isadora Duncan. Cross-referencing Whitman's contribution to modern poetry and Duncan's contribution to modern dance, Bohan reads the Whitman–Duncan affinity as one of the seminal pairings of modern culture.

A particularly fascinating series of questions and issues underlies the contribution of Fernando Alegría. They relate to Whitman's status as the American author who has had the most considerable twentieth-century cultural influence not only at home but also abroad. Alegría first investigated Whitman's influence on Latin American writing in the 1950s and, in coming back to that subject now, is doing so at a time when internationalism has become an important matter in academic (as well as nonacademic) debates. His discussion centers on Whitman and Borges, one of Whitman's

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Excerpt

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most sympathetic Latin American readers and translators. Fascinating as it is in its specific, nuanced analysis, it also can be read generically as a case study of the problems and challenges inherent in cross-cultural intersections of minds, sensibilities, and languages.

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“As If I Were With You”— The Performance of Whitman’s Poetry

Every reader has noticed how often Walt Whitman says *I*. There are few pages of *Leaves of Grass* without at least some form of the first-person pronoun – *I, me, mine, my, myself*. Nor is there any hint of an apology in his acknowledgment of this fact: “I know perfectly well my own egotism . . . and cannot say any less.”¹ Yet *I* is not the pronoun that most markedly distinguishes Whitman’s poetry (as C. Carroll Hollis has calculated, for example, “on a percentage basis Dickinson uses even more”²). *You* is. Whitman doesn’t say *you* as often as he says *I*, but he does use the second-person pronoun more pervasively than any other major poet. Even the assertion of his own egotism that I’ve just quoted is embedded in a larger thought that reveals the interdependence of his authorial *I* and the *you* of his reader:

I know perfectly well my own egotism,
And know my omnivorous words, and cannot say any less,
And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.

To describe this awareness of and address to the reader, Hollis borrows a term from modern linguistics and calls it Whitman’s “illocutionary” stance.³ Ezra Greenspan borrows a term from classical grammar and calls it Whitman’s “vocative technique.”⁴ A more colloquial way to indicate the crucial place *you* occupies in many of Whitman’s poems is to say that they are performances. Whitman put it still more colloquially when he wrote in a notebook: “All my poems do. All I write I write to arouse in you a great personality.”⁵ Of course, as performances they were enacted imaginatively rather than literally. Despite Whitman’s fantasies about being a national orator, speaking from real stages to packed houses, he seldom performed in front of live audiences. Even from the imaginative stage of a printed book, he was not widely read until after his death. But throughout his career he defined the goals of his poetry as public ones, and especially in the poems he wrote before the Civil War he conceived his poetry dramatically, as an address to the reader he refers to as the “listener up there” (1855, 85), the

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you reading the book. That the performance was imaginary did not matter to someone who had so impressive an imagination: What the many *you*'s establish is how real and present his reader was in Whitman's mind. *You* is what I want to explore here. What does *you* do? What is the role that Whitman's reader plays in his imagination and his poetry? Who is *you*? Can we be specific about the way he conceived his reader? And what does Whitman mean when he says that the aim of his performance is to fetch *you* flush with himself?

That shift in the stanza I quoted earlier, from the first person to the second, from an apparent self-absorption to a real concern with an other, is a very common pattern in Whitman's poetry. The first word of "Song of Myself," for instance, is *I*, but the last word is *you*, and the poem's opening stanza announces this larger pattern explicitly:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
(1855, 25)

Looked at closely, both these stanzas reveal how anxious is the relationship they assert between *I* and *you*. The eternal present tense of "I celebrate myself" or "I know my own egotism" has to yield to time (the future tense of "shall assume") and chance (the conditional tense of "would fetch"). What looks at first like amplitude betrays its incompleteness; neither the celebrated self nor his own egotism is enough. As these tense changes indicate, the reader stands outside the circle Whitman is trying to draw. In "Song of Myself" *I* is everything, the whole cosmos, except *you*. Hundreds of other persons are referred to in the poem – prostitutes and presidents, runaway slaves and Texas Rangers – but they can be treated as parts of the self. *You*, on the other hand, though not strictly speaking "in" the poem at all, exists as a separate consciousness. Therefore *you* is the poem's only other character. *You* may in fact be the more important character. As the first line gives way to the second, it suddenly becomes unclear what the poem is about. Is its focus the self and the universe, or the self and the other, the poet and the reader? Which is the occasion for the poem – all that the *I* is or the one thing *I* isn't, that is, *you*?

As the first poem in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself" is the place where Whitman premiered his identity as "Walt Whitman." Thinking of the poem as a performance might help with a problem that all the commentary on it has been unable to resolve. "Song of Myself" is one of the world's great long poems, but none of the many attempts to define its

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structure have been convincing. Unlike other long poems, as Quentin Anderson has pointed out, "Song of Myself" cannot tell a story without fatally compromising the claims to imperial selfhood that Whitman puts in for his *I*.⁶ But if we conceive it generically as an epic poem, we will continue to expect a narrative structure of some kind. We are less likely to bring such expectations to a performance. "Song of Myself" is not a poem about "what happened"; instead, the poem itself, like any performance, is what is happening as it is being read. That is the when of the poem: the "this day and night" the reader spends with the poet, reading the poem (1855, 26). The dramatically charged space between Whitman and the reader is the where of the poem. The poem doesn't have a plot; it is a plot – it is organized around the reader, whose assumptions Whitman seeks to make over in his own image. Looking at "Song of Myself" for its structural design, in the way we can look for the structure of the *Iliad* or *Paradise Lost* or even *The Prelude*, will continue to frustrate critics because its design is essentially outward-looking, rhetorical, strategic. But once this distinction is grasped, we can realize that, like many other epic-length poems, this one announces its argument in its opening lines, as the poet advances out of the self to engage the reader's attention and to commit himself to a performance that will transform the reader. The hero is the poet as performer; the quest is to cross the gap between *I* and *you*. "What I assume you shall assume" – that transaction is the plot of "Song of Myself."

The distinction between story and strategy, between narrative and performative, has many implications. In this essay I can pursue only one: the way making the hero a performer subverts the poem's most grandiose claims, for Whitman, although the poem's creator as well as its hero, cannot finally determine the outcome of the performance plot. That depends on *you*, the readers "up there." In the poem *I* may seem to possess the power to roam freely through all of space and time, but in fact he has to keep coming back to his readers. He may try in the poem's second stanza to pose as a loafer "at my ease," but in fact he is working constantly to fetch his readers to him. We in the audience can choose to attend to the performance on its own terms, and admire or censure, in any case be amazed by Whitman's egotism, his delight in himself, the sureness with which he exhibits that self to us. Whitman's cocky aplomb, his apparent adequacy to any occasion, even the occasion the poem creates of appearing naked before a crowd of strangers, is the absolute center of his performance. On the other hand, if we notice how dramatically and tirelessly he keeps thrusting himself at the audience, we might decide that deeper than his self-possession is an utter need for us, that the self he celebrates is not the pretext, the occasion for the perfor-

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mance, but instead exactly what the textual performance is trying to bring into existence. He explicitly gives his readers the power to *be* “Walt Whitman,” but implicit in his preoccupation with holding their attention is the idea that it is actually the readers who have the power to *create* “Walt Whitman.” At times Whitman can himself admit this dependency. At most times, of course, he asserts his godlike sovereignty: “I exist as I am, that is enough, / If no other in the world be aware I sit content, / . . . One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and that is myself” (1855, 44). Yet there is too much that such an assertion cannot account for, including Whitman’s need to “exist as he is” in public. He comes closer to telling the truth about his rhetorical situation, his dependence on the awareness of others, when he says: “These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing” (1855, 41). Since the “thoughts” revolve around the greatness of the self, it clearly follows that unless *you* celebrate that self too, the self itself is nothing or the next thing to it.

Without *you*, I am enough; without *you*, I am nothing: This contradiction is what makes Whitman’s performative stance so hard to pin down. We can say that consistently he steps to the front of the poem to address his readers directly, but at those moments he speaks in many different tones of voice. He can be aggressive, taunting *your* assumptions: “Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?”; “Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President? / It is a trifle. . . .” Or he can seriously ask for *your* opinions: “I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women, / . . . What do you think has become of the young and old men?” He can be nurturing: “Undrape . . . you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded.” He can be threatening: “Encompass worlds but never try to encompass me, / I crowd your noisiest talk by looking toward you.” He can be ingratiating: “This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody but I will tell you.” It is also unclear how participatory the performance is. He regularly says that we must learn to celebrate our selves too: “All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own.” And he can define himself simply as our representative: “It is you talking just as much as myself. . . . I act as the tongue of you.” But then there are moments when he asserts himself as our savior and master, and defines our selves merely as the extension of his will: “You there, impotent, loose in the knees, open your scarfed chops till I blow grit within you, / . . . I do not ask who you are . . . that is not important to me, / You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you.”⁷ Is he up on stage to be the mirror of our selves, or are we in the audience to serve as the mirror of his self?